

THE NATURAL CURE FOR SPIRITUAL DISEASE

: A Guide into Buddhist Science

by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu

(translated by Santikaro Bhikkhu)

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FOREWORD

Buddha-Dhamma is as vast as the universe and as concise as a moment's flash of insight. Many sentient beings have gotten lost between the two, unable to resolve through direct personal experience the many teachings available today. Fundamental perspectives are required for us to begin sorting out the multiplicity of experiences and concepts. Here, we offer a clear, direct, and practical guide into the essentials of Buddhism, that is, the Dhamma.

While many Buddhists take Dhamma to be "the Buddha's teaching," it really

means "Natural Truth" or "Natural Law." Of course, this is what the Buddha taught and demonstrated, but we must be careful to distinguish the teaching from the Truth itself. Thus, to understand Buddhism one must begin with the Dhamma.

This guide examines the three inter-related aspects of Dhamma and pinpoints the key elements in each. Although Dhamma is One, we interact with it in three basic ways: study (*pariyatti-dhamma*), practice (*patipatti-dhamma*), and realization (*pativedha-dhamma*). Dhamma study is finding the right perspective on our human predicament & what we must do about it. Dhamma practice is developing & correctly applying the basic tools needed for spiritual survival. Dhamma realization is the benefits that occur naturally with correct practice. Each aspect can be approached in many ways. Here, [Buddhadasa Bhikkhu](#) approaches each in a direct and practical way.

Ajarn Buddhadasa conceived of these talks as an introduction to the study, practice, and realization of Buddha-Dhamma. He emphasizes that practice is the key. Nonetheless, without sufficient and correct study, one cannot practice properly. And without realization or the fruition of the rightful benefits of practice, everything is wasted. In short, we cannot have one without the others. We must have all three elements of this trio, and they must be fully integrated through practice.

This guide is translated from the first series of talks given by Ajarn Buddhadasa to foreign meditators attending the monthly courses at Suan Mokkh. It is intended for Western Dhamma friends, including those who are new to Buddhist understanding and practice. We hope that the perspectives offered here will help new students of Buddhism to get their bearings straight from the start. Those who have studied and practiced Buddhism for some time, no matter what the school or approach, should also find this guide helpful. We can never be too clear what Dhamma and Dhamma practice is about. Many have gotten lost for lack of clarity and a good guide.

Ajarn Buddhadasa is keen to foster "mutual good understanding among religions." This translation should contribute to that effort by clarifying what exactly Buddhism is about. Many non-Buddhist visitors to Asia have trouble separating the local culture from the Buddhist teachings about Dhamma. We hope that non-Buddhists who read this may understand the true nature of our religion. Then, "dialogues" will have honest and worthy foundations. It does nobody any good to compare (or criticize) the best of one path with the misuses of another. We must offer each other what is best from each of our paths and then understand and appreciate each other. In this way, all religions may work together to combat our common enemy -- selfishness.

We hope that this little book will enable you to start your practice of Dhamma on the right foot. Confusion about what practice really is, meditating for the wrong reasons, inability to integrate meditation with daily life, and uncertainty about where practice actually leads all wreak havoc on the spiritual lives of both "beginners" and "old hands" alike. The Buddha stressed the need for "right understanding" (*samma-ditthi*) which is not a particular dogma or acceptance of some doctrine. Rather, it is an attitude of alert and joyful investigation of life characterized by the four noble truths. These truths are not to be believed or accepted; they are to be reflected upon and scrutinized until we have mined them for all they are worth. May we all find in this life the inner knowing which frees us from any doubt as to what is true and what is not, without having to defend or proselytize that understanding.

May all beings be free.

*Santikaro Bhikkhu
Suan Mokkhabalarama
November 1991*

EDITORS' NOTES

These talks originally were transcribed and translated in 1986 for the one and only edition of the "Suan Mokkh International Newsletter" (superseded by *Evolution/Liberation*). There were only 350 copies of this mimeographed publication, which went out of print quickly. We have here made some adjustments to that original translation, and hope that it now reads more smoothly and clearly.

Most Dhamma talks in Thai, and especially those of Ajarn Buddhadasa, are full of Pali terms (Pali is the canonical language of early Buddhism). These terms have found their way, along with many Sanskrit words, into Thai and are familiar to all practicing Buddhists. They are rich words, and precise, which express concepts and perspectives which are not always apparent in English. They have the further advantage of being fixed, for Pali is a "dead language," like Church Latin.

We have tried not to overdo the use of Pali terms, here, although Ajarn Buddhadasa asks students to become familiar with them. When possible, we have used an English equivalent. But when there is no English word which captures the full meaning of the Pali term, it is left in Pali and explained parenthetically and in footnotes. Words requiring longer explanations can be found in the glossary, which you may want to rummage through in order to acquaint yourself with these important terms.

All footnotes are provided by the translator.

Finally, thanks to the friends who helped bring this book to print. Steve Schmidt, Daniel Kalish, David Olsson, Sister Dhammadinna, Maechi Nandini (Wendy McCrae), the Venerable Dusadee Metamkuro, and the Dhamma Study & Practice Group.

May their efforts help more people to live with less dukkha and nurture greater peace in this world.

The Editors

Part I :

SCIENTIFIC CURE OF SPIRITUAL DISEASE -

YOUR STUDY OF DHAMMA

(3 February 1986)

Our apologies that the formatting & Pali spelling in this chapter are not yet finished.

[\(click here for glossary\)](#)

To begin, I would like to express my joy that you have come here to study Dhamma (Natural Truth). Second, I would like to thank each of you for helping to make Suan Mokkh a useful and worthwhile place.

Today, I would like to talk with you concerning the question: What benefits will we receive from studying Dhamma? If you get any benefits from Buddhism, you will become a Buddhist automatically, whether or not you go through a conversion ceremony. To convert or not to convert is a meaningless issue. The relevant issue, the important thing, is whether you will get anything useful from Buddhism.

So we will talk about the things that you will gain from Buddhism. Only after realizing that Buddhism has benefited you will you know what Buddhism is about. Until you understand what it is that you have received, you can't really know anything about Buddhism. Let's discuss, then, the things that you will obtain from Buddhism. Thus, you will understand Buddhism and will become a Buddhist automatically.

I would like to say that you will get the best, the highest thing that a human being ought to get. There is nothing more worth getting than this; it surpasses everything. We might call this thing, simply, "New Life." The best thing to do here is to talk about the characteristics of New Life.

Now, for you to understand what is going to be said, I ask you to forget everything. Please forget all the faiths, creeds, and beliefs which you have ever held. Put them all aside for the time being. Even if you prefer to believe in scientific principles more than any of the so-called religions, leave them completely alone for now. Make the mind empty, free, and spotless, so that you can hear something new. Actually, Buddhism shares many characteristics and principles with science, but Buddhism is a science of the mind-heart rather than a science of physical things.¹ Buddhism is a spiritual science. For this reason, it may be something new for you.

Dhamma Medicine

The first thing we would like you to realize is that Buddhism, or Dhamma, is a medicine for curing disease. This is a strange and special medicine because it can be taken by anyone, regardless of religion, nationality, ethnic background, education, class, or language. Anyone may use this medicine, for Dhamma is like those modern drugs that cure physical ailments. Such drugs can be taken by people all over the world, no matter what their religion, race, sex, profession, or language. Although we come from different cultures, we can use the very same kind of medicine. Take aspirin, for example. No matter who and where we are, we can take a few aspirin to get rid of a headache. Dhamma is the same. It is the universal medicine.

We like to say that Dhamma is a medicine for disease or *roga*. I would like for us to use this Pali word "*roga*," because it has a clear and useful meaning. Although it's usually translated as "disease," *roga* literally means "that which pierces and stabs," thus causing pain. We don't really know where the English word "disease" comes from, so we prefer "*roga*." Its meaning is certain and appropriate: stabbing, piercing, skewering. Dhamma is something that can cure this stabbing and piercing of *roga*.

The *roga* with which we're most concerned is spiritual. We can call it "spiritual disease." Physical disease pierces the body; spiritual disease stabs the mind or spirit. Dhamma is the latter's remedy. If we have no spiritual disease, to come and study Dhamma is a complete waste of time. Hence, everyone must look closely in order to know both kinds of *roga*: physical disease, *roga* of the body, and spiritual disease, *roga* of the mind, heart, or spirit. Then, look within yourselves -- right now! -- is there any spiritual disease in you? Are you free from disease or merely enduring it?

We begin our study of Dhamma by getting to know our own *roga*. You must look and search within yourself until seeing and discovering how spiritual disease afflicts you. To do so, you must look inside! If you don't, you won't have a proper beginning to your study of Dhamma. Unless we understand the *roga* from which we suffer, we will only study Dhamma in a foolish, aimless way. Actually, most of

you already have some knowledge about your spiritual disease, but for most that knowledge will be slight, scattered, or unclear.

Let's talk about the disease a bit more in order to clarify it. All of the problems which disturb the mind are problems which arise from aging, illness, and death. These are the first symptoms of the disease. Our minds are disturbed and pestered by problems that result from the fact that we all must grow old, fall sick, and die. These problems are the first thing to look at. Next, there are three general, miscellaneous problems: we get separated from the things we love, we experience things we dislike, and we have wishes which go unfulfilled. These are general problems leading to spiritual disease. Before anything else, each of you must know these problems or *roga* as you actually experience them within yourselves.

LOOK WITHIN

This is why there is the principle that Dhamma must be studied and learned internally, rather than externally. We must learn from life itself. Learn from all the things that you experience within this fathom-long body. Please be certain to learn inside only, and don't bother learning outside. The things that we learn from external sources, such as books and talks, are never enough. Only by looking within can we come to understand these spiritual diseases completely. The external kind of study and learning, such as reading books, discussion, and listening to talks as you are doing now, can do no more than explain the method and means of inner study. This external study only learns how to go about the inner study. Then, you must go and do that inner study in order to understand Dhamma.

I ask all of you to begin your studies from within by studying the problems that you inwardly experience. Please take a look at the problems that arise from aging, sickness, and death. We are afraid of aging, sickness and death; all kinds of problems on many different levels arise from them. We must clearly observe these things in the same way that a geologist examines a rock, as when we take up something with our own hand, hold it up to the light, and carefully examine it until we see it clearly in all its detail. In the same way, we must see clearly the problems that arise from our own aging, illness, and death. Further, we must investigate the problems which develop out of them, such as being separated from beloved things, meeting with unloved things, and desiring things and then not getting them.

The result of all of the above problems is *dukkha* (pain), both physical and mental. The symptoms and conditions of *dukkha* are many and varied. It comes in many forms: sorrow, sadness, dissatisfaction, grief, lamentation, tears, frustration, pain, misery, agony, and more. There are Pali terms for all of these, but what we call them isn't important. We needn't know all of their names, yet we ought to know how these things really feel when we experience them. To begin with, you must know them inside yourselves. All of these are *roga*, the symptoms of *roga*, and the results of the *roga* which we have caught.

Dhamma is the medicine for *roga*, spiritual disease; thus, the matter we're discussing here is a matter of the mind and spirit. The Buddha was one who came to know this disease, found a cure for it, and used the cure in order to free himself from disease. After doing so, the Buddha was then able to teach us about the *roga*, its cure, and the way to administer the cure. Please understand the Lord Buddha in this way. If you are afflicted by spiritual disease, you ought to be interested in his Dhamma.² However, if any one of you is completely free of spiritual disease, you are wasting time on Dhamma -- you can go home. I repeat, anyone who has no spiritual disease is invited to leave.

DEVELOPING THE CURE

Now, let's talk about studying Dhamma, which is the medicine that cures spiritual disease. There are many stages and levels to Dhamma. We begin by studying, as

we do with any ordinary subject.³ Maybe we have no real understanding of Dhamma at the start. Although we have read many books and listened to talks, we don't really know Dhamma. We study in order to know, then we have knowledge. Once we have some knowledge, it must be used. In short, for it to be worthwhile, we must know Dhamma, until having Dhamma, and then use Dhamma.

Let's go through these three things again. Even though we may have read about and studied Dhamma a great deal, although we may have much knowledge of it, we may not have the right kind of knowledge. This means we don't really have Dhamma. If it isn't the correct knowledge, we won't be able to use it. Thus, we need to study until we have a sufficient amount of the right knowledge. Otherwise we won't be able to use it. Please investigate this fact thoroughly. Therefore, we must have Dhamma, we must have correct and sufficient understanding of Dhamma. But having the right knowledge isn't enough, we must have a sufficiently large amount of this correct knowledge and it must be very quick. If it isn't quick, it is never on time and in the place where it is needed. We must be agile and expert in the use of Dhamma.

Simply having this knowledge somewhere in the back of our minds doesn't cure the spiritual disease. We must be expert in it; we need to be very skillful in its proper use. We need to be deft, agile, and expert, so that we are able to understand the spiritual disease that is already present, as well as any new spiritual disease that may arise. If we have this understanding, it is a good start in becoming able to use Dhamma to cure our disease. So study the disease within yourselves. This is the kind of knowledge that you must develop.

JUST ONE TEACHING

You must know that the Buddha spoke of just one thing and nothing else: dukkha (pain, dissatisfaction) and the quenching of dukkha. The Buddha taught only the disease and the cure of the disease; he didn't talk about anything else. When people asked questions about other matters, the Buddha refused to waste his or their time with such things. Nowadays, we spend our time studying all kinds of other things. It's a pity how our curiosity is aroused by matters such as: After death, will I be born again? Where will I be reborn? How will it happen? Please don't waste your time on those things. Instead of reading lots of books, take what time you have to focus on dukkha and the complete, utter quenching of dukkha. This is the knowledge to store up, this is the studying to do. Don't bother studying anything else!

The Lord Buddha taught only dukkha and the total cessation of dukkha. He taught that we must study these two things within our bodies. You can only do this while the body is alive. Once the body dies, you don't have to concern yourselves with this problem any more. But now, while there's life, constantly, continuously, and inwardly study dukkha (spiritual disease) and the utter quenching of dukkha (the cure of the spiritual disease).

Throughout this world there is little interest in this matter of dukkha and its end. None of the world's schools pay any attention to it. In the universities, they don't teach or study it. The only thing taught in our schools and universities is cleverness, the storing up of many facts and the ability to perform mental tricks with them. Students graduate with cleverness and some way to make a living. This is what modern education means-- being clever and earning lots of money. Dukkha and the quenching of dukkha are totally ignored. We believe that all education in today's world is incomplete. It is imperfect because the most important subjects are forgotten; a general base of knowledge and the ability to earn a living are not enough. There is a third area of knowledge which the schools and universities don't teach: how to be a human being. Why do they ignore what it takes to be a proper human being, that is, a human being free of dukkha? Because a proper human being ought to have no spiritual disease, modern education will be incomplete and insufficient as long as it fails to cure spiritual disease.

WHAT ARE HUMAN BEINGS?

It is correct and proper that each of you has come here to undertake the third kind of education: how to be a human being without any problems, how to be free of dukkha. It is good that you have come here and are interested in this topic. In short, use this opportunity to learn what it takes to be a human being.

If someone tells you that you're not yet human, please don't get angry and please don't feel sad. First, you must look and see what it means to be human. So let's take a look at "manusaya," the Pali word for human being. This is a very good word for it has a very useful meaning. manusaya means "lofty-minded one," a mind high enough to be above all problems. Problems are like flood waters, but they can't flood the lofty mind. When one's mind is elevated to a high level, then we can say that one is a manusaya. The speaker isn't sure where the English word "human being" comes from. Our guess is that it must mean "high-minded," also. "Man" is probably related to mana (mind) and "hu" ought to mean "high." So, human ought to mean "high-minded."

As things are, Dhamma is the knowledge which tells us exactly what it means to be human. We're interested in what it is to be fully human, rather than merely masquerading in "human" bodies. To be truly human is to be above all problems. Study and learn in order to be completely human. Study, practice, and work to develop a mind, heart and spirit that is above all problems. By problems, we mean dukkha, the thing which, if it arises, we cannot tolerate or endure. When it occurs, we can't stand it and struggle to get away from it. This causes agitation, discomfort, unhappiness, and unhealthiness. Dukkha, our problem, means "unbearableness, intolerableness." We can't stand it, we can't put up with it."

Once again, let me repeat that if you have no problems you can go home. You need not waste your time studying Dhamma. However, if you happen to have some problems, just one little problem, or perhaps many, then take a good look at them. Stick around and learn how to look at problems.

I dare say that every one of you has a problem, and further, that you all have the same problem. This one problem that bothers us all is the thing we discussed above. It is the problem that arises out of aging, illness, and death. In short, we don't get the things that we want. We can't maintain this body forever. Life is never exactly what we want it to be, we can't have things our way all of the time. This problem is shared by each and every one of us.

SCIENTIFIC APPROACH

We are all in a situation where we must use a scientific method to solve our problem. We must use a specifically scientific approach, because the methods of philosophy and logic can't solve the problem.⁴ There are myriad philosophies concerning everything imaginable, but none of them can solve our problem. Philosophies are very popular with people in today's world, they are fun and interesting, but they don't work. This is why we must turn to a scientific method which can and will solve the problem.

It is now time to recall something about which you've probably already heard: the four noble truths (*ariya-sacca*). Please reflect upon this most important matter. The four noble truths are Buddhism's scientific principle of the mind. The four noble truths allow us to study the specific problem exactly as it is, without relying on any hypothesis. Most of you are familiar with the standard scientific method in which a hypothesis is proposed, then tested through experimentation. Such hypotheses are merely forms of guessing and estimation. With the *ariya-sacca* such clumsiness isn't necessary. Reality is experienced and examined directly, rather than through the limitations of hypothesis, predictions, and guesstimations.

What, then, are the four noble truths that you must look into? They are:

1) dukkha; 2) the cause of dukkha; 3) the quenching of dukkha, through

quenching its cause; 4) there is a way or path that quenches dukkha by ending its cause.

These are the ariya-sacca. They have the features of science, the reasoning of science, and the methodology of science. In short, we apply these truths to real things as they actually happen in life, without using any hypotheses.

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Merely reading books won't enable you to do this science. Books lead to more hypotheses, ideas, and opinions. Even in a book about Buddhism, the four noble truths become just more hypotheses. Such is not science, it is only philosophy, which is always inviting us to play around with hypotheses. So we often get stuck in endless circles of suppositions, propositions, and arguments. There is no true Dhamma in that, there is no reality of actually quenched dukkha.

THE REAL THING

If we want to be scientific about it, practice with the real thing and forget the hypotheses. Study the real thing itself: study dukkha as you experience it. Look at the cause of dukkha by experiencing that cause. Observe through direct personal experience the other side of the coin -- the end of dukkha. Lastly, investigate what you must do to end dukkha. This way is scientific. For as long as you aren't doing this, you're doing philosophy. You'll only have a philosophical Buddhism. Don't get stuck in theories. Look inside, study inside yourselves, see these truths as they actually happen. Just playing around with ideas about Buddhism, you will never find the real thing.

If you study Buddhism from books only, no matter what your sources, or how you study, in the end you'll always come away with the feeling that Buddhism is a philosophy. This is because the authors of most books on Buddhism approach it as a philosophy. They actually believe that Buddhism is a philosophy, which is totally wrong.

FORGET ABOUT PHILOSOPHY

This idea that Buddhism is a philosophy, put it aside, lock it up in a drawer, in order to practice by studying directly in the mind, as they happen, dukkha, the cause of dukkha, the end of dukkha, and the way that leads to the end of dukkha. Study these until you experience the quenching of some dukkha. As soon as you experience this, you'll know that Buddhism is no philosophy.

You will know instantly that Buddhism is a science. It has the structure, principles, and spirit of science, not of philosophy. At the same time, you'll see that it is a religion, one with its own particular character, that is, a religion entirely compatible with modern science. Everything that is truly understood by science is acceptable to Buddhism, the religion which is a science of the mind and spirit. Please understand Buddhism in this way.

You may be one of the many who believe that a religion must have a God and that without a God it isn't a religion. Most people believe that a religion must have at least one God, if not many. Such understanding is not correct. A wiser view is that there are two kinds of religion: theistic and non-theistic. Theistic religions postulate a God as the highest thing and belief in that God is all-important. Consider Buddhism to be non-theistic, for it doesn't postulate any belief in a personal God. Buddhism, however, has an impersonal God, that is the Truth (*sacca*) of Nature according to scientific principles. This Truth is the highest thing in Buddhism, equivalent to the God or gods of theistic religions.

You should study the word "religion," it doesn't mean "to believe in God." If you look up this word in a good dictionary, you'll see that it comes from the Latin *religare*, which means "to observe and to bind with the Supreme Thing." Ancient grammarians once thought that *religare* came from the root *lig*, to observe. Thus, religion was "a system of observance that led to the final goal of humanity." Later scholars considered that it came from the root *leg*, to bind. Then, religion became

"the thing that binds human beings to the Supreme Thing (God)." Finally, both meanings were combined and religion was understood to be "the system of observance (practice) that binds human beings to the Supreme Thing." The Supreme Thing needn't be called "God." If, however, you insist on calling it "God," then recognize that "God" must have two meanings: personal God and impersonal God.

THE BUDDHIST GOD

If you prefer to call it "God," you should understand that Buddhism has the law of nature as its God. The Law of Nature -- for example, the law of idappaccayata, which is the law of causality and conditionality -- is the Buddhist God. idappaccayata means:

With this as condition, this is; Because this arises, this arises. Without this as condition, this is not; Because this ceases, this ceases.⁵

This is the Supreme Thing in Buddhism; this Law of Nature is the Buddhist God. In Buddhism there isn't a personal God; its God -- the Law of Nature -- is an impersonal God. Because Buddhism, in fact, has a God, it is a religion.

Many Western writers and scholars of Buddhism say that it isn't a religion, since it has no God. They make a terrible blunder, because they don't know anything about the impersonal God. If they knew it, they would see that it is more real and true than any personal God. Then, they wouldn't write that Buddhism isn't a religion. They would write that Buddhism is another kind of religion. Religions with personal gods are one kind of religion, but Buddhism is the other kind, the kind that has an impersonal God.

Most religions believe in a Creator, usually an individualistic God with a personality. The Buddhist Creator is impersonal. This impersonal God, the Law of Dhamma or Nature, is the law of idappaccayata:

Because this is, so this is. Because this is, thus this is. Because this is, so this is.

This is the law of causality, the natural evolutionary process of this causing this which in turn causes this and so on in endless concocting. Buddhism has a Creator, but it is the impersonal God. If you are able to understand the difference between these two kinds of Gods -- impersonal law of causality and personal Creator -- it will be easy for you to realize what Buddhism is.

When things happen in this way, you'll realize that this matter of dukkha and its quenching happen according to the law of the impersonal God. Then, you'll understand Dhamma correctly and live in harmony with Dhamma. You'll see it as science rather than mere philosophy. The distinction between science and philosophy will ensure that your study of Buddhism is correct and in line with Dhamma.

If you have this knowledge and use it, you have the medicine for curing spiritual disease. By taking this medicine, the heart is emancipated; it is saved, that is, freed from all dukkha. Every religion teaches emancipation, but only Buddhism teaches freedom from all problems, from all of the problems discussed above. Thus, there is no problem or dukkha to dominate us; this is called "emancipation." We have been cured of all the diseases discussed above.

I hope that you understand the general principles, the meaning, and the genuine goal of Buddhism. If you do, you'll steadily solve your problems, because your understanding will be correct from the start.

If you understand what has been said, you will proceed smoothly in the study and cure of spiritual disease. As time has run out, more details must wait until the next talk. Before closing, I would like to express my joy at the right action of all of you who have come to work on this problem of spiritual disease.

And, once again, I thank you for helping to make Suan Mokkh a useful place.

Endnotes

1. In Buddhist terminology, there is no real distinction made between the heart and the mind. The intellect and the emotions are not seen as being polar opposites. Rather, it is all citta, which can be translated "mind," "heart," or "mind-heart." We use these three terms as synonyms.
 2. Here, Dhamma is both Natural Truth and the knowledge of Natural Truth which enables us to end the disease, that is, dukkha.
 3. Here, study is not just intellectual learning. It involves thinking, investigation, training, experimentation, and direct experience, with emphasis on the training and experience.
 4. Ajarn Buddhadasa makes a clear distinction between philosophy and science, as he understands the two terms. The former is mere speculation devoid of practical application, while the latter can be directly experienced and personally verified through practice.
 5. Some translators render these lines "this ... that ...," but the Pali original explicitly repeats "this ... this" We leave it to the reader to reflect why.
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[Go to Part II : The Use of Dhamma](#)

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